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A well-timed approach to grade crossing safety

Compliments of Park Rubber Company, Lake Zurich, Illinois

Grade crossing safety

E-E-E

By Frank E. Shaffer

Engineering, education, and enforcement are keys to a proven program for reducing deaths and damage at rail-highway crossings

A driver and four passengers died two years ago in a train-car crash east of Des Moines, Iowa. From this tragedy has come fresh impetus for the Operation Lifesaver program.

Many thousands of motorists will be alive in the years to come because of those 1976 deaths where East 56th Street crosses the Rock Island.

In its findings after an investigation, the National Transportation Safety Board recommended that the National Safety Council "serve as a national focal point and coordinator for the total development, implementation, and evaluation of a nationwide Operation Lifesaver rail-highway grade crossing safety program."

The national program is now being developed at NSC. State programs are already at work saving lives.

NTSB also recommended:

- that the AAR cooperate with NSC in development of the program by urging its member roads to allocate additional resources;
- that the National Highway Traffic Administration actively participate and support the NSC;
- and that the FRA, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and the Federal Highway Administration lend their support.

Demands for more grade crossing safety measures are not new. Almost a decade ago, when R.N. Whitman was FRA administrator, a Task Force on Railroad Safety reported to the Secretary of Transportation that "the motoring public is part of the safety problem. Drivers must be educated to accept the meaning of warning devices and be required to heed them. Compliance must be enforced."

The report noted that, under existing federal law, funds could be spent only for federal aid highways. These include interstate, primary, and secondary roads accounting for only 20 percent of all crossings.

"There is an imperative need for an expanded public program to cover the other 80 percent," the report said.

It works

Operation Lifesaver is a part of that program. Even without major investments in warning systems, lives have been saved.

This program began in Idaho five years ago under the guidance of the Union Pacific. Barry Sweedler, deputy director, NTSB Bureau of Plans and Programs, tells how well it worked.

"There were 19 fatalities in 1972, the year before the program started. There was a 39 percent drop to 11 fatalities in 1973. But then the program was dropped.

"The following two years showed the effect of this decision. There was a jump to 20 deaths in 1974 and to 22 in 1975 after which the program was started again. It worked and we saw 1976 fatalities drop to eight. There were nine in 1977."

Idaho's results were not a fluke. Nebraska started in 1975, a year in which fatalities were 46 percent lower than 1974. It, too, dropped the program and saw fatalities climb to 36 in 1976. Again, resumption of Operation Lifesaver produced results. The 1977 toll was only 14.

Southern's president, L. Stanley Crane, had similar results to praise when he spoke late last year in Birmingham.

"We saw a 26 percent decline in fatalities in Alabama for the year ended July 1. What is perhaps more significant is that total deaths were up 17 percent."

What is Operation Lifesaver?

The program is made up of Engineering, Education, and Enforcement. It can begin with a publicity blitz, mowing weeds around crossing signals, and enforcement of existing laws.

Engineering alone, says Illinois Chief Railroad Engineer, Ray Peterson, will not produce satisfactory results.

"Two thirds of the accidents in Illinois are at crossings with warning systems," he reports.

The need for enforcement was the basis for the NTSB recommendation in the Des Moines case for participation by the International Association of Police Chiefs.

Education does not have to wait for major engineering appropriations. For example, Houston, Texas, can't wait. The city has more crossings than the entire states of Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Nevada, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wyoming combined.

Citywide publicity heralded the program. Safety material is being destributed to the 180,000 drivers who graduate each year from defensive driving training agencies.

And, to provide a catchy slogan, Tom Murphy, an ATSF public relations representative in Dallas, borrowed an idea from a

popular science fiction movie. He suggested, "avoid close encounters of the train kind."

Operation Lifesaver is underway in 14 states,* NTSB's Sweedler reports. Thirteen others are in the active planning stage while six or more are in early planning.

"These 33 states have 88 percent of all crossing fatalities," he said."

Railroads are willing to participate in the program, Mr. Sweedler indicates. There are more problems with highway departments than with railroads. Crossing safety is not a big problem in the eyes of highway people.

Some railroads have film presentations available for use by civic groups. Family Lines, for example, has a 10-minute slide show and a 10-minute motion picture. It is offering the program to school bus drivers, high school driver education classes, and other organizations.

State police officers are helping. Colorado State Highway Patrolmen have made more than 700 appearances before 12,000 drivers.

"Our Patrolmen are emphasizing that motorists should be aware of the importance of enforcing rail crossing laws," says C. Wayne Keith, state patrol chief.

For the railroads, however, the "bottom line" is the litigation cost.

As one state official said during an interview with *Modern Railroads*, "When you educate drivers on crossing safety, you're educating potential jurors." ■

Promoting crossing safety to automobile drivers is important, for as one state official in Illinois reports, "Two-thirds of the accidents in the state are at crossings with warning systems."

* Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Nevada, Oregon, Texas, and Utah.

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